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Hall of records, Washington, D.C.





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HALL OF RECORDS, WASHINGTON, D. C.

L E T T E R

FROM

THE SECRETARY OF THE TREASURY,

URGING

THE NECESSITY FOR THE CONSTRUCTION OF A HALL OF
RECORDS IN THE CITY OF WASHINGTON, D. C.

MARCH 5, 1902.—Ordered to be printed.

U. S. TREASURY DEPARTMENT,
OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY,
Washington, March 3, 1902.

SIR: I have the honor to submit the following statement in amplification of that paragraph of the Annual Report of the Secretary of the Treasury, 1901, page 34, relating to the urgent necessity for constructing a Hall of Records in this city:

It seems proper at the outset to remark upon the extreme importance of this matter as exhibited by the persistence with which it has compelled the attention of the committees of Congress and officers of the Executive Departments during many years, and to notice the consensus of opinion as to the imperative demand for providing safe-keeping for the invaluable records of the Government.

This proposed structure first appears under the title "Hall of Records" in the Annual Report of the Secretary of War (Ex. Doc., 1878-79, vol. 2) in which the Secretary emphasizes the hazardous situation of records of great value in the Quartermaster-General's Office, such records containing the original proof in claims against the United States to the amount of many millions of dollars.

This action seems to have been prompted by the alarm created by the losses which had lately occurred by fire at the Patent Office and Interior Department. It does not, however, appear that the matter was considered by any committee of Congress until March 16, 1882, when the House Committee on Public Buildings and Grounds reported:

That the necessity for the erection of a suitable fireproof building for the safe-keeping of the records and official papers of the several departments, which have been accumulated since the formation of the Government, has long been apparent to anyone who has given any consideration to the subject. At present, papers whose

value can not be estimated and which can not be replaced, involving large sums of money to the Government, are stored away in the different departments, some of them in rented buildings not fireproof and liable at any moment to be destroyed by fire.

The bill upon which this report was made did not pass, but the sundry civil bill, approved August 7, 1882, contained the following:

That the Supervising Architect of the Treasury be, and he is, required to make a report through the Secretary of the Treasury to the next session of Congress, first, as to a suitable plat of ground belonging to the United States upon which a suitable fireproof building can be erected, to be built of brick, to be used for the safe-keeping of records of the executive, legislative, and judicial departments, which are not required for constant reference; second, the probable cost of such building, with plans and specifications for same.

On January 17, 1883, the Supervising Architect reported somewhat in detail upon a site, plans, and specifications for the building, but it does not appear that Congress took any action on the report.

On December 19, 1883, President Arthur transmitted to Congress a letter from the Secretary of War stating the necessity for the construction of a fireproof building for the storage of public records. The recommendations of former years were urgently renewed.

In 1886 the Treasury Department again took up the subject, and in March of that year the Supervising Architect recommended the construction of a building for the safe-keeping of records, reviewed the efforts already made, and adds:

As to the advisability of constructing this building so as to accommodate the offices named, I have to report that it would be both wise and economical. In both my annual reports the attention of Congress has been called to the necessity for such a building. The losses which the Government has already sustained by fire, lead me to call especial attention to the necessity for a fireproof building for the files of the Executive Departments.

During a period of nearly ten years following this recommendation, nothing appears to have been done, either in Congress or in the Executive Departments, looking to the building of a Hall of Records.

March 31, 1894, the House Committee on Public Buildings and Grounds reported:

Your committee fully concur with the Senate that a Hall of Records is one of the present pressing needs of the Government here at the capital. Very large accumulations of records of great value are now stored in insecure buildings liable to destruction by fire or to damage or loss from other causes.

If through any accident these records should be destroyed their reproduction would be impossible, and great inconvenience and much embarrassment would result to the several departments of the Government thereby. In most instances these records pertain to questions of great importance and value, and they have been steadily accumulating since the organization of the Government, and they must be preserved for future reference. They are in such quantity as to require a great deal of space, and are of course constantly increasing in volume. Those which are not placed on storage in unsafe outside buildings are occupying highly valuable space in the various departments, which is badly needed for the transaction of current business.

In some instances department buildings have become dangerously overweighted with these accumulated records, and the heads of departments have found it necessary for safety to remove the files into other buildings. These records all together are now occupying a vast quantity of space in the department buildings, and it is believed that the transfer of all of them not required for daily use to a building constructed for the purpose would greatly facilitate the transaction of the public business.

Nothing definite was accomplished by the consideration given to the bill upon which this report was made.

In April, 1896, the Secretary of the Treasury addressed letters to the Committees on Public Buildings and Grounds of both Houses referring to the bill for the construction of a Hall of Records then under consideration, and says:

I have the honor to state in behalf of this Department that the necessity for such a building can not be too strongly urged. The files rooms in this building are as a rule overcrowded, and have been for a number of years past, and to relieve them some of the papers and documents to which reference is rarely made were transferred to and placed in the basement ground floor of the Winder Building, where they are packed in a solid mass, which makes them inaccessible for reference without great labor, and where they are exposed more or less to dampness, which must in time destroy their usefulness.

The papers and documents were not transferred to the Winder Building until every expedient was resorted to to relieve this building from its overcrowded condition. Three of the corridors in the attic are shelved and filled with files and papers so exposed that evil-disposed persons can tamper with them. Within the last year a large number of vouchers were abstracted by one of the laborers of the Department for the internal-revenue stamps which they bore, and the vouchers subsequently destroyed by him. Other portions of the building are so crowded and the files so located as to be almost inaccessible in case of fire, and the destruction which might arise from such an outbreak would be irreparable, and vast interests of the Government placed in jeopardy.

In his annual report for 1897 the Secretary of the Treasury stated that the needs for such a building were imperative and that nothing had since developed to modify or change the conditions as stated in the letter above quoted.

March 22, 1898, the Assistant Secretary of the Treasury, referring to a statement published in the Evening Star of same date, says:

A committee of the Treasury has recently been reassigning the rooms in the Treasury building, and as its work has progressed the necessity for file room has become more and more apparent. The Treasury Department, by reason of a want of proper space for its employees, has been compelled to store tons of valuable records in places that are not only inconvenient, but to a certain degree insecure. In the basement, down under the east portico, are stored the accumulations of years. It is necessary to use in these places artificial lights at all times, and notwithstanding every precaution and care to guard against fires, there is always more or less danger. The files rooms of the garret are not less unsuitable for the uses to which they are being put at this time.

It will be of great advantage to the Treasury Department to have its records not in daily use stored safely in such a building as has long been contemplated for a Hall of Records.

The following extract is made from the Annual Report of the Secretary of the Treasury for 1899:

The earnest consideration of Congress is again invited to the necessity for providing a Hall of Records in this city in which the uncurrent files of the various Executive Departments and other branches of the Government may be stored.

This matter has been the subject of agitation for many years past, but with no practical results. The growth of the Government's business is so rapid, and the accumulation of the files so great as a consequence, that all of the Executive Departments are cramped for room in which to store the files which by law must be preserved. The destruction by fire of any one of the Executive Departments would cause almost irreparable injury, confusion, and delay in the transaction of its business, and this is especially true of the Treasury. This Department is the great clearing house of the Government. Here all its debts are paid, and here are preserved the evidences of such payment. The files stored in this building are in such condition that a fire may ensue at any time, and in the event of their destruction numberless claims against the Government would at once arise to embarrass it.

In the Secretary's opinion, there is no public improvement more needed for the welfare of the nation than a Hall of Records in this city, and the matter is presented for the careful consideration of Congress, with the hope that action will be taken at this session looking to the erection of such building.

The above passage is repeated in the annual report of the Secretary of the Treasury, 1900, with the remark:

The attention of Congress has been repeatedly called to the necessity for providing a Hall of Records in this city in which uncurrent files of the various Executive Departments and other branches of the Government may be stored. The Secretary would be remiss in duty if he did not present the matter again for the consideration of Congress.

In addition to the above, this Department has, from time to time, from January 7, 1897, to January 25, 1902, reported to the committees of Congress upon bills looking to the purchase of a site for the hall of records, to which no further reference is now necessary, except to remark that in almost all cases the Department has been constrained to report the site suggested insufficient in size for the accommodation of a building of sufficient capacity for the purpose desired.

It seems impossible to state with greater emphasis or with greater weight of authority than appears in the above quotations the reasonable appeal that is made for a suitable structure for housing the records of the Government. As a question of comparative economy the case is equally free from doubt. To say nothing of the question of safety, which involves a multitude of important interests, both public and private, the present method of storage is extravagant in waste of space in the costly public buildings, which should be otherwise used, in expenses for rented buildings, and in the cost of handling and of access to the files for reference.

THE BUILDING.

In the sundry civil bill approved June 11, 1896, the Secretary of the Treasury, in connection with a report upon a site at the intersection of Ohio and Indiana avenues with Tenth and Twelfth streets, was directed also to submit a plan giving the size and general characteristics of a building to be used for a Hall of Records, and also before making his report to consult with the heads of the other departments and the proper officers of the Senate and House of Representatives.

In response to this provision of law the Secretary of the Treasury (Mr. Carlisle), January 7, 1897, made a partial report, with the statement that he was awaiting further communications from other departments, and was not prepared to make a final report upon the subject at that time.

January 14, 1898, the Secretary of the Treasury (Mr. Gage) made a further report upon the plan and dimensions of the building required (House Doc. 226, Fifty-fifth Congress, second session), as follows:

From information obtained upon consultation with the heads of the other departments and the proper officers of the Senate and House of Representatives, it appears that a building proportioned to the present requirements, with provision for increase for a moderate period, should have a capacity of approximately 4,000,000 cubic feet.

The Secretary also submitted two designs, one for a building nine stories in height adapted to the site upon which a report had been requested; the other for a building of more suitable proportions adapted to a site of proper dimensions. Referring to the latter, he says:

Design B shows a building 400 by 70 feet having four stories, fireproof construction, and estimated to cost \$450,000. It will be observed that the capacity of this design, approximately 1,000,000 cubic feet, is considerably less than what will ultimately be required, as provided by Design A. Design B, however, offers this advantage: The building is capable of extension, as indicated on the plan, without impairing its

architectural appearance, to the approximate capacity of 4,000,000 cubic feet. The portion of the building shown will, when completed, relieve the present congested condition of files storage, and extension could be made at some future time and ultimately complete the quadrangle.

The statements received from the departments and other officers appear in a condensed and tabular form, hereto attached, together with a copy of Plan B.

In a letter addressed by the Secretary of the Treasury to the chairman of the Senate Committee on Public Buildings and Grounds, April 20, 1900, reporting, at the request of the committee, upon S. 2247, the following language is used:

The Department is of the opinion that it is desirable to acquire, looking to the construction of a building which, when completed, will have a capacity of 4,000,000 cubic feet, a rectangular block of not less, approximately, than 350 feet square.

It will be observed that a building of 4,000,000 cubic feet is one of great magnitude, and the Department is of the opinion that a site ample in size should be provided for it. On such a site a building could advantageously be planned, so that a portion of it, say 2,000,000 cubic feet, could first be erected with a view to attaining the full capacity by future extensions, and it is obvious that the architectural appearance, as well as the utility of such a building, would be promoted by separating it from the streets and contiguous buildings by reasonably ample spaces. In this connection reference is made to the remarks of the undersigned upon Design B, in Document 226, hereinbefore referred to.

On a site of limited area it will be necessary to make the ground floor coextensive with the site, and therefore there will be no way by which the capacity of the building can be increased except by imposing upon it additional stories, a work extremely difficult, if not impracticable, of execution after the lower stories have been occupied for the storage of records.

In a letter dated May 5, 1900, addressed by the Supervising Architect to the Secretary of the Treasury in response to a request for a report on certain sites for the Hall of Records, one of which was power house square, No. 255, is found the following passage:

For the approximate quantity of Government files now on hand to be moved into the proposed Hall of Records reference is respectfully made to the attached schedule of reports made by the several departments to the Secretary of the Treasury in August, 1896. It will be observed that all the departments submitted an estimate of future requirements, but the details of present requirements were not in all cases given. It is not known that the statements of future requirements were made to cover a period of twenty-five years, but it is believed that they cover a reasonable provision for the future.

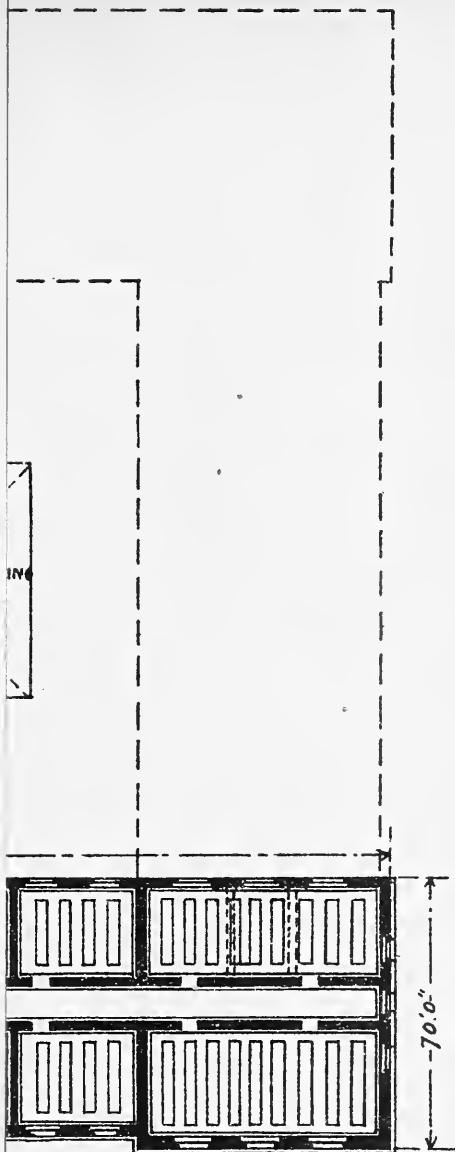
The approximate cost of building on the power-house site, including E street and a portion of the reservation, is estimated:

For site	\$500, 000
For building	2, 500, 000
For pile foundation	25, 000
Total	3, 025, 000

The building to have a gross capacity of about 5, 000, 000 cubic feet, including halls, corridors, light shafts, etc.

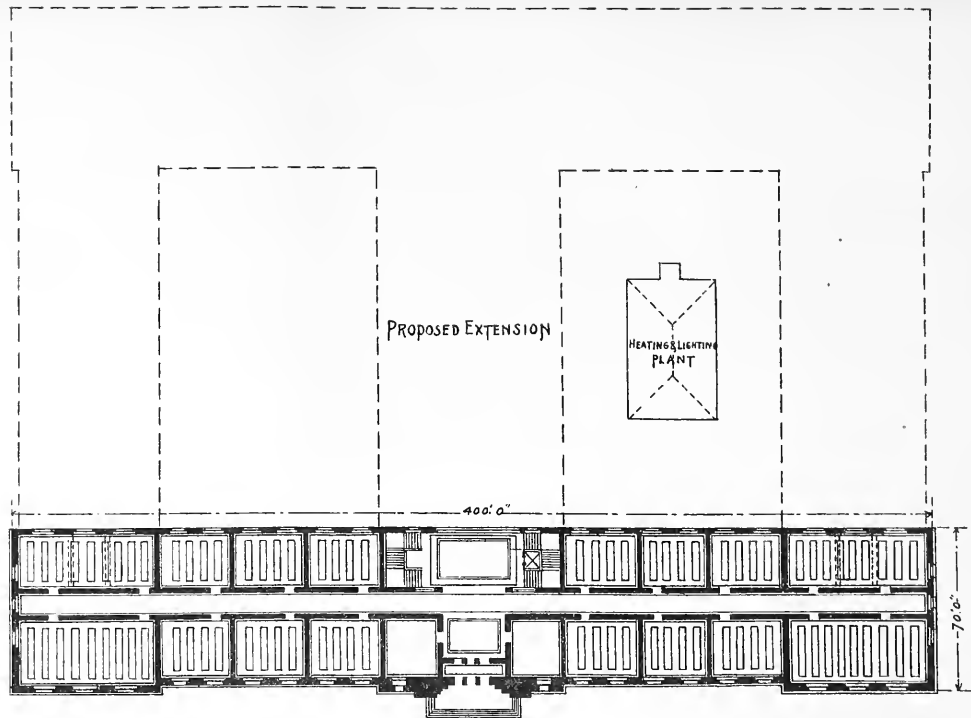
In a letter dated May 7, 1900, addressed to the Secretary of the Treasury by the Supervising Architect, in response to a request for a statement as to the suitable dimensions for a site for the proposed Hall of Records, the following language is used:

Assuming that the building should have a capacity of 5,000,000 cubic feet to provide for a reasonable future period, the structure would be of about the size of the Washington post-office. Erected like the post-office on a city block of average size, the building would have to be seven or eight stories high, and the entire building would have to be built at one time, as it would be hardly practicable to erect at first enough for present needs and afterwards meet future demands by adding upper stories to an occupied building.



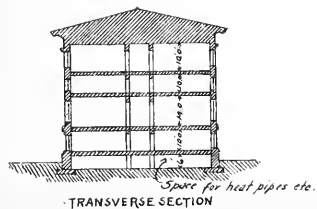
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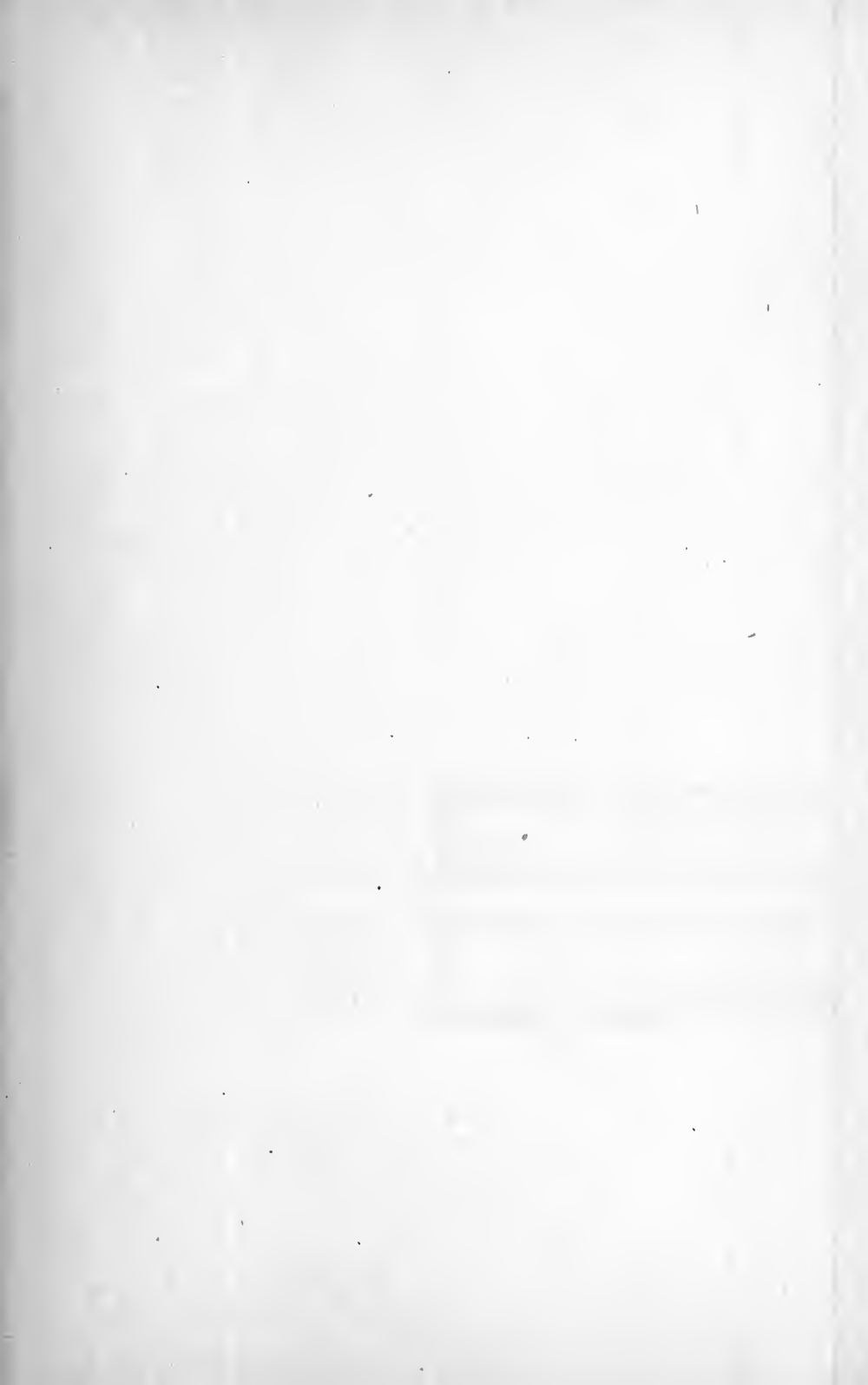
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